

BOOK REVIEW 2007 - #2

Evens, Jules, and Ian Tait. *Introduction to California Birdlife*. 2005. xii + 382 pp; 150 color photographs; illustrations; maps; checklist of California birds; glossary; references; index of birds; general index. California Natural History Guide Series No. 83. Hardcover ISBN 0-520-23861-3 Price: US \$45.00. Softcover ISBN 0-520-24254-8 Price: US \$16.95. Available from University of California Press, 2120 Berkeley Way, Berkeley, California 94704.

Lentz, Joan Easton. *Introduction to Birds of the Southern California Coast*. 2006. xiv + 316; color photographs; illustrations; maps; seasonal occurrence bar graphs; suggested reading; index of birds; general index. California Natural History Guide Series No. 84. Hardcover ISBN 0-520-23780-3 Price: US \$55.00. Softcover ISBN 0-520-24321-8 Price: US \$19.95. Available from University of California Press, 2120 Berkeley Way, Berkeley, California 94704.

Evens and Tait's noteworthy book, *Introduction to California Birdlife* (California Birdlife), provides a special insight into understanding bird behavior that could be applied to any state or region. Published as part of the California Natural History Guide Series, California Birdlife illustrates a method of examining the natural world that stresses avian ecological relationships over taxonomy and the details of species identifications.

In contrast, Lentz's excellent tome, *Introduction to Birds of the Southern California Coast* (*Birds of the Southern California Coast*), also published as part of the California Natural History Guide Series, offers a more typical field guide treatment to birds of a specific region. When carried together into the field, one may feel well prepared for discovery, especially if the first introductory chapters have been read beforehand.

In their "Preface" to *California Birdlife*, the authors clearly state that "This is not a field guide," even though the publisher promotes the book as a field guide to birds (web site address is www.ucpress.edu). The photographs by Ian Tait are all of excellent quality, but were included only for illustrative purposes rather than for field identification. The authors further suggest that the user have a true bird field guide near at hand to view species mentioned in the text that lack an accompanying photograph. Seven bioregions are designated for the state in *California Birdlife*; and each is given a separate chapter: Sea-birds and the Marine Environment, Birds of the Shoreline, Birds of the Coastal Ranges, Birds of the Central Valley and Delta, Birds of the Mountains and Foothills, Birds of the Great Basin, and The Deserts' Birds.

Characteristic birds of each region are mentioned, but few, as warned in the "Preface," are illustrated with photographs. Certain species with an interesting story (e.g., California Condor; Marbled Murrelet) are occasionally given special attention. Bird habitats are mostly defined by plant communities, except in situations such as the open ocean. Typical bird species for each plant community (e.g., grassland, subalpine meadow, chaparral, lodgepole pine forest) are mentioned, but no plant illustrations are offered. Furthermore each chapter has a simplified map of California showing the location and aerial extent of a particular bioregion in relation to the state's boundaries. But these maps and a few other maps within the text are of limited value in locating specific sites mentioned in the text.

Thus, readers may wish to have a state atlas and a field guide to plants handy as well as a field guide to birds.

Putting these inconveniences aside, *California Birdlife* is well written and quite informative on a variety of subjects. The book may look and feel like a field guide (7 1/4 in x 4 1/2 in, durable backing, small type), but it is clearly a book that deserves to be carefully read from front to back. With the exception of beginning with the first chapter, "An Overview of California Birdlife," the book may be read in any order without loss of continuity. Occasional side bars (i.e., more in-depth discussion of special topics such as hybridization) and excerpts from Evens' personal field journal add a meaningful variety of information to the text.

California Birdlife is particularly interesting because Evens approaches the subject matter from an ecological or habitat perspective with birds as the focal organisms. For example, when covering seabird habitats, Evens includes a discussion of oceanography that covers topics such as El Niño and the Coriolis effect. Throughout the book, a wide selection of ecological concepts are introduced at appropriate times as related to birds in specific habitats; topics include: predator-prey relationships, habitat partitioning, niche, meta-population dynamics, adaptive radiation, and the principle of competitive exclusion. Of course, when discussing birds and their habitat relationships as viewed in the wild, one must also consider evolutionary factors; that is, how current situations developed over long periods of time and over many generations. Evens certainly does this occasionally, but sometimes in a rather unscientific way, referring to "evolution's subtlety and ingenuity" or "evolution's creativity and genius."

When considering wildlife habitats within any region today, it is nearly always a given that human effects must be part of the discussion. If not, the author may be considered naive or out-of-touch with reality. Imagine discussing, for example, grassland bird habitats in Illinois without considering the effects of agriculture and habitat fragmentation. Therefore, Evens' frequent references to conservation issues (e.g., spotted owl and logging, wetland loss and waterfowl habitat, pesticides and raptor populations) are appropriate and even necessary.

California Birdlife offers much more than a simple introduction to the birds of California. The reader will gain knowledge of a variety of subjects that will enhance the field experience, although, as already mentioned, the identification of species in the field is not a strong point, nor is guiding the traveler to specific locations in which to view birds. It ends with a hopeful thought, which somewhat balances a slight scattering of negativity throughout when addressing conservation issues, that we may recognize our dependence, with birds and other wildlife, on maintaining the earth's natural processes for the benefit of all living organisms.

While *California Birdlife* may enhance one's field experience by explaining relationships among birds and their habitats, *Birds of the Southern California Coast* was designed to bring travelers to a destination and help them identify birds in the field while interpreting bird behavior. The book is divided into three major sections: the "Introduction," which contains basic information on bird habitats, behavior, and how to find and watch birds; "Species Accounts"; and "Birding Sites Along the Coast."

The 120 species accounts, arranged in taxonomic order (i.e., not by habitat as in California Birdlife), make-up the bulk of *Birds of the Southern California Coast*. Each account includes a high-quality color photograph of the highlighted species; a few short paragraphs with information on behavior, habitat needs, and other items of interest (e.g., conservation); and information on size, plumage, special identifying features, and status (resident, migrant, etc.). The photographs may be effective in helping to identify species that have highly distinctive plumage (e.g., male waterfowl). But for species where plumage differences are subtle, such as sparrows and sandpipers, nothing can take the place of detailed color artwork, as may be found in Sibley (2001), where small details can be emphasized without being limited by lighting conditions or other uncontrollable factors.

An important feature of *Birds of the Southern California Coast* is the section on birding sites. Simple, yet meaningful maps are provided for portions of six coastal counties with detailed directions to a number of birding sites, including tips on visitation, finding specific species, and traveling by boat. A special section entitled "Seasonal Occurrence Bar Graphs" is useful to determine beforehand whether or not a species should be present at a particular location during a certain period of the year. This can help in bird identification by eliminating species that should not be given consideration. The separate shorebird size chart and gull identification guide should help users on positive identifications within these two difficult groups.

If one is planning a bird-finding trip to the southern California coast, both *Birds of the Southern California Coast* and *California Birdlife* will be very useful references, although both would probably be most meaningful to birders or serious naturalists with a focus on birds, rather than ornithological researchers. However, bird enthusiasts, of other states not planning a trip to California, will still find it interesting to compare habitat affinities for similar species that occur in California but not in other states (e.g., California Towhee versus Eastern Towhee) or to note similar habitat choices for species with widespread distributions (e.g., colonial cliff swallows that build mud nests under overhanging rocky shelves or bridges). The bioregional approach works very well for a state such as California, where each bioregion is quite distinct; but for an agriculturally dominated state such as Illinois, similarities between some regions (Grand Prairie versus Southern Till Plain) may be more obvious than subtle differences. For Illinois and other midwestern states, the use of general types of habitats (e.g., forest, grassland, row-crop agriculture) rather than bioregions might be more meaningful for organizing bird populations than bioregions. Still, *California Birdlife* shows how such an approach can be applied.

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Literature Cited

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